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Hamilton Questions Reagan Policies

Indiana Congressman Plays Growing Role In U.S. Foreign Affairs

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WASHINGTON—He is a quiet man who can make himself heard, a minister's son who sits at the right hand of power. Almost unnoticed, Lee Hamilton has come of age in Congress, and after two decades in the House, the cautious Democrat from southern Indiana is assuming a prominent role in shaping foreign policy.

"He has great credibility with me," says House Speaker Thomas O'Neill.

Lee Hamilton

As Congress begins debate on the two divisive issues that will dominate this session—Central America and the continued presence of U.S. Marines in Lebanon—Mr. Hamilton is perhaps the most important single adviser to the House Democratic leadership.

"There are accents to the speaker's voice," says Majority Whip Thomas Foley (D-Wash.) describing Mr. O'Neill's tone at leadership meetings. "He will say, 'Lee, what have you got to say on this?' "

Rep. Hamilton is taken seriously at the White House, too. Just last week President Reagan answered Mr. Hamilton's queries about the Marines' presence in Lebanon with a lengthy reply that amounted to a major policy statement on the administration's determination to keep them there.

Last summer he got the White House's attention on Central American policy when he helped lead an unprecedented challenge to the administration's covert war in Nicaragua. And now he is expressing reservations about the Kissinger Commission report on Central America, which the Reagan administration intends to use to bolster its plea for more military aid to its allies in that region.

"The biggest disappointment is the lack of emphasis on negotiations," he says of the Kissinger Commission report. "There's not "enough emphasis on political solutions."

With the death of Chairman Clement Zablocki (D., Wis.) last year, Mr. Hamilton is the ranking Democrat on the Foreign Affairs Committee, and in combination with the feisty new chairman, Rep. Dante Fascell (D., Fla.) his rise is seen by Democrats as an opportunity for the House panel to reassert itself in foreign policy.

His three years on the Intelligence Committee have added to his stature and aggressiveness so that the Indiana Democrat is a critical barometer of the White House's ability to win bipartisan support for its foreign policy initiatives.

At 52 years old, Mr. Hamilton is part of a new generation of leaders who fall between the post-World War II and post-Vietnam eras. He is less apt to apply either of those historic analogies to foreign policy. Instead, he draws lessons from both. He often seemed a bridge between Mr. Zablocki and younger Democrats because he shares not only the late chairman's commitment to an American role abroad but also the younger generation's suspicion of military entanglements.

His rural district in southern Indiana gives him unusual freedom from the ethnic voting blocks that often influence Congress on foreign policy, and this has added to his credibility. Under President Carter, he took the lead in a difficult fight for military aid to Turkey opposed by Greek-Americans, including his powerful Indiana colleague, former Majority Whip John Brademas. In 1980, Mr. Hamilton made a less successful effort to salvage $3.5 million in economic funds for Syria, opposed by Jewish voters and members aligned with the pro-Israel lobby.

He prefers diplomacy to military solutions. For instance, he is far more willing to approve economic aid to Central America than a substantial increase in arms assistance. He insists on human-rights conditions on arms for El Salvador, and last year he played a critical role in preserving Democratic unity on that issue.

While Mr. Reagan may dismiss liberal opposition in Congress, to lose Mr. Hamilton is to lose a crucial bridge between the left and right.

This was most evident in the debate on Nicaragua last summer, and in both Intelligence and Foreign Affairs committees, the CIA-backed incursion provoked a sharp partisan split. Though Mr. Zablocki wavered, Mr. Hamilton was firmly allied with Intelligence Committee Chairman Edward Boland (D., Mass.), and their victory laid the groundwork for a later compromise limiting funding for the operation.

In a rare secret session of the full House, it was Mr. Hamilton who delivered what many described as the most damaging speech. The congressman built his case by turning the CIA's recently completed National Intelligence Estimate against the CIA and administration. "The two most careful guys in the House are probably Eddie Boland and Lee Hamilton," said Rep. Leon Panetta (D., Calif.) after the closed door session. "If they're concerned about a policy, you'd better be concerned."

Even as Mr. Hamilton helped draft the Lebanon war powers resolution last fall allowing the Marines to stay in Beirut for 18 months, he warned the administration it couldn't expect continued support from the House for the full period. Unless diplomatic progress is made, he said, his backing of the Marine presence could wane after March, and he was clearly disappointed that Mr. Reagan gave no encouragement of an earlier withdrawal in his letter to Mr. Hamilton last week.

This exchange between the president and Mr. Hamilton is a striking illustration of the Democrat's importance and style. Always cautious, the congressman didn't consider even writing a letter until encouraged by Rep. Les Aspin (D., Wis.), who has a greater flair for publicity and political maneuvering. The first and final drafts were Mr. Hamilton's in substance, however.

A tall scholarly man who neither drinks nor smokes, Mr. Hamilton is a striking contrast to the burly, cigar smoking Mr. O'Neill. His graying crewcut and flat-toned voice suit his Midwest reserve, but underneath is the more physical, engaging style of the six-foot-four-inch center who starred in basketball in high school and at DePauw University.

Evansville, the congressman's boyhood home, is a river port city on the Ohio. After years of campaigning and post office tours in small hamlets, Mr. Hamilton's picture can be found on the walls of rural gas stations, and the district has put its own stamp on him.

Careful not to move too far away from domestic concerns, he has balanced his foreign policy interest with a long tenure on the Joint Economic Committee, which he will head in 1985. He has separated himself from the Great Society and New Deal liberalism of Lyndon Johnson and Mr. O'Neill, and he almost painfully cultivates the image of the independent who cannot be captured by any interest.

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